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ABSTRACT

An overview of the literature in family communication since 1976 reveals that a huge body of research continues to focus on the family context but that little of this research is being conducted by scholars whose primary interest is communication. Communication researchers could make a contribution to family communication research if they documented more precise relationships among levels of communication skills attainment, methods of communication training, and the degree of family member satisfaction with the family relationship. Contemporary communication research has drawn upon the conceptual frameworks of descriptive, prescriptive, and systems perspectives. The objective of the descriptive approach is to understand family relationships and the impact of the family unit on society. Studies of coupling, separation, and divorce are among the most common topic areas for those who adopt such a perspective. The prescriptive approach seeks to identify specific behaviors or techniques that can result in an improved communication climate and enhance family member satisfaction with the family unit. The systems approach emphasizes the relationship of all parts of the system (family members) and notes how the individual components of the system relate to one another and affect the whole. Because of its utility and inherent flexibility in accommodating both descriptive and prescriptive approaches to the study of families, the systems approach will probably continue to undergird theoretical frameworks for investigating family communication. (HOD)

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AN OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH LITERATURE IN FAMILY COMMUNICATION: 1976-1982

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Family communication is an area of study that is attracting an increasing amount of attention by speech communication scholars. Each year new university courses are being added to speech communication curricula, new units in family communication appear in interpersonal communication textbooks and courses, and the number of papers and programs in family communication offered at regional and national meetings has increased.

The Summer, 1976 edition of Human Communication Research offered a book review essay by Arthur P. Bochner entitled "Conceptual Frontiers in the Study of Communication in Families: An Introduction to the Literature." In that essay, Professor Bochner made a number of observations about the status of family communication research and concluded with recommendations for further research in family communication. The purpose of this paper is to review Professor Bochner's observations and recommendations, to provide and overview of the family communication literature since the Bochner article in light of those observations and recommendations, and to provide a contemporary assessment of current directions in family communication research.

One of Bochner's first observations was that ". . .it is surprising to find that few studies of families have been conducted by persons interested primarily in communication. This inactivity is even more astonishing when one considers that communication scholars have traditionally partitioned knowledge according to contexts, i.e., dyadic, small group, organizational, and mass" (1976, p. 381).

Our first question, then, is whether communication scholars have filled the research void to which Bochner referred. In a word, the answer is "no." A search through the literature since 1976 reveals that

very few communication scholars have turned their attention toward the family except insofar as the family serves as a context wherein decisions are made about television viewing and in which commercial advertising is consumed (Chaffee & Tims, 1976; Eackman, et. al., 1977; Sheikh and Moleski, 1977; Prasad, et. al., 1978; Robertson, 1979). There are a few notable exceptions, however. Goldberg and Goldberg (1976) proposed a rationale for the study of family communication by speech communication scholars and offered some useful pedagogical directions for courses in family communication. Beier and Sternberg (1977) reported studies of the nonverbal communication of husbands and wives as such behaviors related to marital adjustment. Powers and Hutchinson extended the study of communication apprehension to the family and marital context. Gilbert (1976) explored the relations among self-disclosure, intimacy and communication in families.

A search through the literature reveals very quickly that most studies of communication in families are conducted by scholars outside of the speech communication discipline. More surprising is the fact that while curricula and convention programs reflect increased research interest in family communication, that interest is not reflected in communication journals. Only two of the non-broadcasting studies cited above (Goldberg and Goldberg, 1976; Beier and Sternberg, 1977) were published in national or regional SCA or ICA publications. Whether the absence of family-related articles in such journals is a reflection of the editorial policies of such journals or on an absence of quality manuscripts in the area is unknown by the present writers.

Power As an Interaction Concept

Bochner (1976) noted that "(P)ower is one of the few concepts which has been compatible with the different orientations of both family sociologists and clinical researchers. Unfortunately, the concept of family power is beset with a hornet's nest of conceptual and methodological problems (Safilios-Rothschild, 1970; Turk, 1974)." (p. 384). He goes on to observe that conceptual definitions of family power were not dynamic and that operational definitions had not been shown to be clearly valid or clearly related to one another. Thus he recommended replacing static, trait-oriented definitions of family power with a view of power as ". . .the emergent pattern of communication processes used in negotiating family decisions. Such a model would relate family process to outcome by concentrating on the interactional configurations which produce family decisions. . . (1976, p. 385)."

Such a view of family power seems to be developing in the research. In a study by Hollerback (1980) power between husbands and wives was seen as resulting from communication processes and decision-making outcomes. In his review of power in families Berger (1980) saw power as determined not by the "absolute number of resources a person brings to the marriage. . .but rather the relative contribution of resources to the relationship" (p. 210). He suggests further that resources may be viewed as interpersonal skills and favors, as well as tangible resources such as income. In their textbook, Galvin and Brommel (1982) provide an extensive discussion of family power that includes discussion of such sub-topics as power bases, power exchange, power processes, power outcomes, development of power in families, power patterns, and power

strategies, to name a few. Their view of family power is consistent with Bochner's recommendations in approaching family power as a system of interactional processes.

Families as Communication Networks Rather than Groups

Bochner criticized studies that viewed families as a special class of small group and used research tools such as Bales' Interaction Process Analysis for their study. He suggested in his summary that families be seen as communication networks rather than small groups. Our search through the literature indicates that the view of families as small groups has been abandoned as Bochner suggested. As we shall report later in this paper, the systems approach to families has taken hold.

Patterns of Family Communication

Bochner's remaining suggestions for further research revolved around the study of communication patterns in the family: "how families set their own standards of behavior and evaluate those standards; how many distinctive ways it is possible for a family to be a 'normal,' adaptive, information processing system; and in what ways specific interaction patterns relate to content themes around an about which families transact" (1976, p. 392).

The literature reveals a number of studies exploring such specific patterns of communication as those required for solving marital conflict (e.g. Feldman, 1979), dysfunctional patterns of family communication and their relation to learning disability (Knapp and Kaye, 1980), and the effects of war on communication patterns within the family (Cohen and

Dotan, 1976). Pedagogical literature lends strong support to the importance of communication patterns in the family (Galvin and Brommel, 1982). However, research aimed directly at answering Bochner's questions about communication patterns in the family were not found in the present review of the literature.

Current Approaches to the Study of Family Communication

Recent compendiums of marriage and family communication research compile by Galvin and Brommel (1982) and Nass and McDonald (1982) document the quantity of contemporary research efforts. Categorization of this research into general conceptual frameworks would seem a useful tool for further understanding the perspectives and aims of the various researchers. Bochner (1976) pointed to conceptual overviews of earlier family research by Hill and Hansen (1960), Bateson (1956), and Jackson (1957), in an effort to help the uninitiated researcher understand different objectives of this research. Bochner first noted that research is sometimes undertaken to help us understand the family group. Until now this has primarily been the domain of sociologists and anthropologists. The second approach to family research has as its aim to help families change their behavior in an effort to improve the quality of family relationships. This second approach grows out of family therapy and the clinical tradition of family research. A third general perspective discussed, but not singled out as a major conceptual framework by Bochner, is the systems approach. A systems approach to family communication evolved from researchers' attempts to help us both understand families and prescribe behaviors for the improvement of family quality. What follows is a selected overview of recent family

communication research organized around these three conceptual approach. The first approach, which grows out of a desire to understand families better, we call the descriptive approach. The second approach is labeled the prescriptive approach. And the third is a systems perspective.

The Descriptive Approach

The objective of those who approach family research from a descriptive perspective is to understand family relationships and the impact of the family unit on society. Descriptive studies of families and family communication investigate such topics as family traditions, patterns, rules, and norms. Considerable attention is often devoted to statistical profiles of family life (e.g., trends in marriage and divorce). A primary function of the descriptive approach is to explain how the family unit has evolved and to speculate how family life will affect, and be affected by, society in the future. The search for universal principles that help to explain family relationships underlie this approach.

Studies of coupling, separation and divorce are among the most common topic areas for those who adopt a descriptive research perspective. Recent research by Albrecht (1980), Booth and White (1980), Crosby (1980), Dixton and Weitzman (1980), Kulka and Weingarter (1979), and Spanier and Casto (1979), are typical examples of studies reflecting a descriptive framework which focuses upon marriage and divorce. Their value to the communication scholar lies in helping us to better understand normative family behavior.

Another topic often approached from a descriptive perspective is that of role development. Studies by Araji (1977), Askhan (1976), Clarke-Steward (1978), Cordell, Parker and Sawin (1980), Ferrel, Tolone and Walsh (1977), Jackson (1977) and Lamb (1979) are representative of research which helps us better understand how family roles are formed and how they affect family relationships. Those interested in family communication would find these studies somewhat useful instruction in the importance of communication in the role development process.

Additional research from a descriptive perspective has focused on such topics as family stress (c.f., Chiriboga and Cutler, 1978; and Miller and Sollie, 1980), the impact of children on family relationships (c.f., Eiduson, 1979, Easterlin, 1982 and Gullotta, 1979. But perhaps of most interest to the communication researcher are studies describing factors which influence the quality of communication, such as relationships between self disclosure and marital satisfaction (c.f.,Jorgensen and Gaudy 1980; and Gilbert, 1976). Montgomery (1981) has also investigated factors that affect the quality of communication in marriage.

Bochner (1976) felt that studying the family as a group operating according to group theories and methodologies (e.g. Interactions Process Analysis) would not produce fruitful results. He states "Empirical studies of families seldom produce results which are consistent with empirical studies of ad hoc groups" (1976, p. 384). Recent research efforts do seem to be pulling away from studying families as groups and attempting to study them as unique context.

Family decision making has been investigated by Scanzoni and Szinovacz (1980), Thomas (1977), Klein and Hill (1979), and Krueger and Smith (1982) and interpersonal perception and its effects on family

relationships has been studied by Bochner, Drueger, and Chmielewski (1982).

The Prescriptive Approach

Growing out of a tradition of dealing with troubled families in clinical settings, the prescriptive approach seeks to identify specific behaviors or techniques that can result in an improved communication climate and enhance family member satisfaction with the family unit. Communication workshops and marriage and family retreats are often developed with the objective of improving such communication skills as feedback, listening, conflict management and self-disclosure. Books by Carnes (1981), Miller, Nunnally, and Wackman (1979); and Sawin (1979) are reflective of works which prescribe specific behaviors in an effort to improve communication climate.

A common research plan for those who adopt a prescriptive research perspective calls for the identification of differences between distressed and nondistressed family communication. Specifically, researchers have looked for relationships between marital satisfaction and a variety of other variables, such as emotional responsiveness (Gottman, 1982), nonverbal communication (Gottman and Porterfield, 1981), conflict management (Margolin and Wampold, 1981; and Noller (1980); and other interpersonal skills, such as listening and feedback (Boy and Roach, 1977; Fitzpatic and Best, 1979; Gantman, 1980; Hawkins, Weinsber and Ray, 1980; and Sporakowski and Hughston, 1978).

Besides identifying differences between distressed and nondistressed couples, researchers have endeavored to test the value of skill development workshops, retreats, and marriage enrichment weekends (c.f.,

Otto, 1975; and Koch and Koch, 1976; Hopkins and Hopkins, 1976). These researchers have questioned whether skill development intervention programs work and whether they produce long-lasting results, Gurman and Kniskern (1977) found that enrichment programs may help, in the short term but questioned whether long-range results are achieved. Kilmann, Julian, and Moreault (1978); and Foster (1978) also report that skill development approaches may have short-term effects, but additional research is needed to determine whether more lasting changes occur. Other studies which have focused on specific methods of changing communication patterns include Scanzoni (1979), L'Abate (1981), and DeYoung (1979).

Systems Approach

Evolving from family therapists (prescriptive approach) and from those seeking a framework for better understanding the way families interact (descriptive approach), systems approach to families emerged in the early 1950's. Family therapists began to provide assistance to the entire family rather than just to the one of two family members with acute problems of family The systems approach emphasizes the relationship of all parts of the system (in this case, the family members), and notes how the individual components of the system relate to one another and affect the whole. To change the system, or to change an individual element in the system, one must take into account the characteristics of the entire system. Kantor and Lehr believe that "family systems, like all social systems, are organizationally complex, open, adaptive, and information-processing systems." Proponents of systems theory believe that it is inappropriate to try to identify a

single specific cause of an event, such as the break-up of a marriage. A recent article by Bavelas and Segal (1982) provides a comprehensive overview of the development and application of family systems theory for those interested in studying family communication. Barnhill (1979); and Olson, Sprenkle, and Russlell (1979) have also identified applications of systems theory to families. An excellent text by Galvin and Brommel (1982) also adopts a systems perspective. As a rationale for their systems approach, the authors comment:

> Using a systems approach, we consider in depth the communication processes within the family and the extent to which communication affects and is affected by the family. The focus of the text is descriptive rather than prescriptive, because we believe that description provides the understanding necessary to the eventual development of valid prescriptions.

Because of its utility and inherent flexibility in accommodating both descriptive and prescriptive approaches to the study of families, the systems approach will probably continue to undergird theoretical frameworks for investigating family communication.

Conclusions

This overview of the Literature in family communication since 1976 has revealed that there is a huge body of research that continues to focus on the family context but that little of this research is being conducted by scholars whose primary interest is communication. Bochner (1976) considered this inactivity astonishing as do the present authors.

Studies of the family are difficult; they do not lend themselves to paper and pencil tests on two hundred college sophomores in basic speech communication classes. Yet the family is a context so fundamental to human experience that we should be pursuing its study more vigorously. The family is a relatively permanent, ongoing group that provides a

natural laboratory for communication scholars to test theories and principles in a setting where ". . .traditions, norms, roles, idiosyncratic code systems, previous history, and group phases have greater influence. . ." than in classroom and other experimental groups (Goldberg and Goldberg, 1976).

We suggest pursuit of some of the same questions raised by Bochner in 1976. How do families make decisions, establish rules and norms, and how are such processes different in families than in other, less permanent groups? What kinds of interaction patterns are associated with family "health?" How do family interaction patterns change over time as the family system changes? Toward the end of answering some of these questions we urge our colleagues to begin longitudinal study of communication in families. An additional question that needs to be investigated concerns the relationships between a family member's attainment of communication skill proficiency and his or her satisfaction with the family unit. The improvement of specific communication skills, such as listening, feedback, conflict management, and sensitivity to nonverbal cues, has been assumed to be a desirable goal in communication training. Prescriptive approaches to family communication research suggest that family communication skill development is a valuable pursuit. Questions could be raised, however, as to whether improved level of skill attainment actually results in improved satisfaction and overall well-adjusted family relationships. Or could it be that communication competence accrues from a more satisfied family climate? This question is based upon the lack of support for long-term effects of communication training programs. Another question worth considering is whether the methods used in bringing about communication behavior change in families

are the most appropriate. Clearly, communication researchers could make a contribution to family communication research if more precise relationships among level of communication skill attainment, method of communication training, and degree of family member satisfaction with the family relationship were documented.

Bochner (1976) echoed an important theme of the systems perspective of Kantor and Lehr (1975). Their conclusion: there is no ideal way for all families to behave. We too, think this point is worth stressing. In our quest for approaches to improve our understanding of family communication and to provide models for improving communication skills, we should note that each family system is unique. As Kantor and Lehr (1975) suggest, family systems are adaptive, structurally open, information processing entities with different homeostatic ideals. While a certain degree of prescription is useful to help family members structure their energy and motivation toward improving family relationships, caution is needed against rigid prescription of so-called normative or ideal behavior.

Drawing upon the conceptual frameworks of descriptive, prescriptive, and systems perspectives seems the most desirable route to both understanding and changing family communication behavior. There exists no set of rules to insure that any family will function at an ideal level. Kantor and Lehr note, "We shall understand families when we know how they manage the mundane." The objective of family communication research should be to help families understand and improve the routine communication concerns that face them on a day-to-day basis. We should not be concerned just with periods of family crisis (e.g., divorce,

separation). Herbert Otto, who has investigated the growth potential of families, states:

> It is crystal clear that families function at a very small fraction of their potential and that the possibilities and potentialities of family living remain largely to be explored (1975, p. 32).

Most people want (and need) to be members of families in which they are able to express themselves openly and honestly, to feel comfortable, free, and loved. Satir, identifying the characteristics of a growth-oriented family, believes that if you were a member of such a family, you would:

- Be listened to and be interested in listening to others.
- Feel like a person in your own right-- noticed, valued, loved, and clearly asked to notice, value, and love others.
- Participate in a family in which people look at one another, not through one another or at the floor.
- Experience children who seem open and friendly and whom the rest of the family treats as persons.
- Be in a family in which people seem comfortable about touching one another and showing their affection, regardless of age. Loving and caring would be shown by talking openly and listening with concern, by being straight and real with one another.
- Feel free to tell other family members how you feel. Anything could be talked about--disappointments, fears, hurts, angers, criticism, as well as the joys and achievements (1972, pp 13-14).

Assuming that Satir's goals are both realistic and attainable, there is clearly a need for additional research to help us better understand and develop family relationships. Speech communication scholars should play a vital role in pioneering the trail toward greater insight in improving family communication.

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